

INFORMATION SERVES THE WHOLE LABOR PROGRAM

by

Carl E. Kemmerly, Jr.*

Fellow workers, as you all see by your program of this meeting, we folks from Louisiana have been asked to discuss the topic of what should be included in a farm labor information program. Now, that's a pretty inclusive topic. I am reminded of the speaker at another meeting who was invited to take as his topic "The Condition of the World Today." I hope you will pardon me if I seem to take as much leeway as he did.

Be that as it may, I am glad of an opportunity to discuss the information phase of the farm labor program with you, and to tell you how we operated in Louisiana.

There was nothing miraculous about our farm labor information program in Louisiana. Nothing sensational. I can't say that we ever crowded the atom bomb or the GOP off the front pages. We have no record of any Louisiana city being deserted when its entire population swarmed into the fields to help dig potatoes. I have not heard of any farmer being lynched by a mob of disappointed victory farm volunteers when he told them he had no work for them on his place. As I go along, a lot of you folks probably will be saying to yourselves--or maybe to me--"We did that a lot better in our State."

But we got in our crops down in Louisiana. We met the need, with a minimum of confusion and difficulty, and that's what counts. We just kept hammering until we got the job done..

One last word of explanation before I get down to brass tacks and start talking about what I'm supposed to talk about: We have no full-time farm labor information man in Louisiana, but we have had splendid cooperation from the Extension editorial office in Louisiana. That's generally the case down South--maybe it's because we are all Democrats. The farm labor information program was handled by Mr. Charles W. Price, Jr., Assistant Extension Editor, along with his other duties. Mr. Price represented us in photography, radio script writing, news writing and all other editorial phases of the program.

As we saw it in Louisiana, to do our duty in helping meet the farm labor shortage, we had to do four things:

First, we had to familiarize ourselves with the needs.

Second, we had to do everything possible to encourage the best possible use of the labor that was available.

Third, we had to do everything possible to encourage the most efficient use of labor-saving machinery, techniques, and so on.

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Fourth, through the victory farm volunteer campaign and other activities we had to help make available to the farmers labor from every possible source. Our activities along this line included locating labor, recruiting labor, and helping train labor. These last were particularly important during the war. Concerning their probable importance in the future, I shall say more later.

In Louisiana, the entire problem is complicated by the fact that we have three major crops and several important smaller crops, each of which requires a great deal of seasonal or temporary labor during the peak harvest season. The most important of these crops are cotton, sugar cane, rice, potatoes, strawberries, beans and tomatoes.

Therefore, beginning early in the year we have to look ahead as far as possible and begin our information and other work to meet the needs of a varied agriculture. Our information work opens with the annual outlook meetings held by Extension in Louisiana as in other States. The farm labor situation and the prospects for farm labor throughout the year receive a great deal of emphasis at all these meetings. Surveys and forecasts of all kinds are naturally popular at the beginning of the year and we have found this an ideal time to reach a wide audience by press and radio as well as through the outlook meetings themselves in every parish and community.

As the period of peak demand for labor in each crop approaches, we repeat the process on a sectional or local scale. We begin far in advance with stories and radio broadcasts on crop prospects and the labor supply. These stories are slanted not only for use in the areas where the harvest will take place but, of course, in other areas where we may expect to find help. Stories aimed to reach the public in general emphasize the importance of the crop and the need for maximum food production, and the fact that the farmers must have help to get the harvest in. Other stories, slanted toward the farmers themselves, tell, as best we know, where help may be found and how they can make use of the Extension Service program. Still others, slanted toward potential workers, tell all about wages and working conditions and how employers can be contacted. Some of these stories read pretty well to the worker--I don't have to tell any farmer that wages and working conditions on the farm have been higher and better. Some farmers say higher and better than they can afford for themselves.

All this information is distributed by press and radio, as well as through talks before groups and personal contacts. We are particularly anxious always to enlist the aid and cooperation of farm organizations and of all parish and local governmental organizations and of civic groups of all kinds in towns and cities. In these periods of short labor supply, we have found it very necessary to secure the cooperation of the farmers themselves in swapping labor from one parish or section to another. The worst thing that can happen to a labor recruiting and utilization program is for the farmers in one section to get a notion that they are being raided and their help may not all come back.

That, in brief, is the basis for our year 'round information program. Or, perhaps, we might say it is the foundation of our information program. Those are the lines along which we work steadily, 12 months out of the year.

During the past few years, city folk have gotten a new idea of what agriculture means to them, and the cooperation of daily newspapers and radio stations as well as weekly newspapers and farm magazines has been excellent.

We find a ready market for all our news stories, radio scripts and photographs. The only requirement is that the information be sound and the news real news. But in writing about agriculture, there never is any need for exaggeration or sensationalism.

In addition to all this, we have our information work with regard to special activities of all kinds. As part of our educational work we conduct in Louisiana each year activities such as sheep shearing schools and schools on care and maintenance of tractors. These are all duly advertised in advance in order to assure a good attendance. We try not only to get out the necessary feature stories and radio scripts but to contact personally as many as possible of the interested employers. Often sheep growers or plantation owners send their foreman and their entire crews to these shows.

We are always careful, also, to invite the feature writers of the larger newspapers and the representatives of the larger radio stations. They often attend. And since such events are something new to them; they often give us even more space or time than we ourselves would have the nerve to ask for these activities. Whenever possible, photographs showing proper methods and techniques are made during the shows and used later to reach a larger audience with at least a certain amount of the valuable information imparted by the instructors.

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All this, of course, has to do with our second basic point, proper utilization of labor. We have found it advisable also to do everything possible to help employers see the necessity of proper guidance and supervision of volunteer and recruited labor which, during wartime, often has been mighty green. Farmers everywhere have complained about the quality of the wartime labor supply, and a lot of these complaints have been justified. But we have found that a lot can be done by proper supervision and guidance. For instance, take the high school boys and girls who volunteered for work in the Louisiana Irish potato belt under the Victory Farm Volunteer program. We investigated the work of two typical crews, working for adjoining farmers under similar crop conditions. One Irish potato grower swore that the cost of getting his potatoes out of the ground was ruining him. The other said he was getting his potatoes dug cheaper than with skilled adult labor before the war.

It didn't take us long to find the answer. The first grower had just sent a lot of green kids into the field and told them to get to work picking up potatoes. They spent about a third of their time resting, going for a drink of water, dragging heavy sacks up and down the row, and throwing clods at one another.

The second grower had planned everything. He had a good foreman in the field with the kids. Their work was laid out so that the biggest and strongest could do the work of which they were capable and that the smaller could keep up their end without over-exerting themselves. Regular rest periods were

scheduled. A water boy made the rounds regularly with good cool water. Another boy did nothing but see that the diggers were supplied with sacks or baskets whenever needed. Several larger boys were appointed to load the sacked potatoes on a wagon drawn by a tractor. It all sounds complicated, but it gave the youngsters a sense of competition and teamwork and made the whole operation far more efficient. Each youngster quickly learned his individual tasks and everything went smoothly. Lots of the boys earned spending money to see them through the rest of the year.

Another example of this was that of the bean grower who followed pretty much the same system and then each day paid his youthful bean pickers with stacks of bright shiny dimes. Not even a pile of dollar bills is as pretty as the same amount of money in a pile of dimes.

These and many other such things were grist for our informational and educational mill. Working through the local papers, through the schools, through the Parent-Teacher Associations and through local civic groups, we informed the youngsters of the need and found many ready volunteers for farm work during vacation and during weekends. In many parishes, the schools rearranged their sessions, with the consent of the parents, to begin the term late or end it earlier than usual so boys and girls could help out with farm work. In all of our stories we were careful to mention that the youngsters who volunteered under the VFV program would have safe transportation to and from the farm where they worked and that they would have intelligent supervision and would not be required to work too hard or do dangerous work. During the entire time that this program has been under way in Louisiana, there have been no serious accidents or unpleasant incidents.

In encouraging the maximum use of labor-saving machinery and labor-saving devices and techniques, we have emphasized the importance of keeping machinery in repair and of keeping it busy through custom work or cooperative use. I might add that during the war years the South has gotten a completely new idea of what can be done with proper use of farm machinery and such devices as cross-plowing of cotton. I can tell you that more tractor sheds than ever before are going up in the South, but fewer tenant houses.

But in regard to utilization of machinery, I believe that we have done our best work by means of the farm and home labor-saving shows that were held in Louisiana during the past year and will be held in many other towns and communities hereafter.

These shows were sponsored by the emergency farm labor program of the Extension Service. In staging them we had the cooperation of the parish agricultural agents and home demonstration agents, the farm organizations, the home demonstration councils, the farm machinery wholesalers and retailers in every community, the Louisiana State University agricultural experiment station, the Louisiana farm council, and virtually every other agency or organization interested in the welfare and progress of agriculture.

The purpose of the shows was to demonstrate what can be done by use of farm machinery, to show farmers the new machines that are coming on the market,

and, above all, to show what the farmer himself can do through a little industry and ingenuity. The shows were staged on fair grounds, on the campuses of various colleges and schools, and on the grounds of former prisoner of war camps--at any strategic location where facilities and space were available.

Space was made available free to manufacturers and retailers of all kinds of farm and home equipment, everything from tractors and potato shredders to radios and washing machines. And we got an excellent response. But the emphasis was not alone on the products of the manufacturers. We were particularly interested in the home-made devices and inventions of the farmers themselves.

The farmer is an ingenious cuss. He has to be, to make a living farming. And there is hardly a farmer who hasn't some pet contraption that he made himself on his own farm, in his own machine shop, to make some hard job a little easier. In preparing for a farm and home show, one of the first things we did was to contact farmers throughout the vicinity and offer them our help in exhibiting at the show any home-made invention that might be of use to any other farmer. These home-made inventions were the real feature of the show.

You would be surprised to see the things we found. Everything from home-made tree shakers, used in harvesting pecans, to a tractor attachment that does everything from breaking the ground and distributing the fertilizer to planting the seed in one operation. That invention since has been sold by the farmer who invented it and is being manufactured commercially.

There were home-made fence post drivers, home-made fertilizer distributors, home-made rice wagons and sugar-cane loaders, home-made hoeing machines, home-made potato shredders, and even a home-made tractor that one farmer made during the war from old scrap iron and automobile parts.

Our first step in planning these shows was to secure the cooperation of all the agencies that I have mentioned and begin contacting all the individuals that would be interested in taking part. We began our publicity work on a Statewide basis with stories and radio scripts and talks on plans for the shows and their purposes. We began with stories sent out from the State office to all the newspapers and radio stations. Then, as the date for the first show approached, we got down to work on a local basis.

The groundwork had been laid. All we had to do was point out to the local editor that virtually all the major home appliance and farm machinery dealers planned to have booths at the show. It didn't take the editor long to get the bit in his teeth. Our only job was to supply enough copy to fill in the space around the ads. Our farm and home labor-saving shows were preceded by a real barrage of publicity, winding up in special editions and special sections a short time before the show was held. I want to emphasize that we ourselves did not sell a single ad or render any service to any commercial company. All we did was supply the editor with an idea and after it had been done once or twice we didn't even have to do that.

Radio stations were similarly cooperative and in all towns where a station was located, the shows were fully advertised by radio and special broadcasts were made from the shows. Our largest clear channel station on several occasions sent its farm director with his mobile transcription unit and stories about the Louisiana farm and home labor-saving shows were aired over a national network.

The commercial companies took care to see that their own exhibits were duly advertised. The local agencies and civic groups whose cooperation we secured handled their own information work. And here's something else I would like to point out. In all our stories, photographic lay-outs and radio material we played up the connection between proper use of machinery and food production and emphasized the contributions of individual farmers and the inventions they exhibited. I don't need to remind any of you that while a story on some exhibit by a commercial company probably will go right into the editor's wastebasket, a good story about Farmer Jones' home-made fertilizer distributor may get a three or four-column spread on the feature page.

At the beginning, we fed the daily newspapers and weeklies and radio stations throughout the State every line and every picture we thought they could take--and got excellent results. After we figured we had done our best in this line, we let the Statewide angle rock along and concentrated on the local build-up, beginning with early advance stories and culminating in a special edition, all arranged through the whole-hearted cooperation of most local editors.

I would like to emphasize again that the farm and home labor-saving shows were local affairs arranged by local people. The State office supplied only assistance and advice. Everyone of our shows was different. Each was local and featured local people, the booths of local dealers, and the inventions of local farmers.

And those are the highlights of our informational program in Louisiana. I haven't the time to tell you of all the special problems that arose or the special work we had to do. And, as I understand it, this session is devoted more to editorial and informational work rather than to any discussion of our farm labor organization in Louisiana and exactly how it works and the other problems it may have faced.

One more job I might mention was that of preparing the public for the appearance of 3,000 laborers from the West Indies who were to be brought in last fall to help with the cane and rice harvests and replace the prisoners of war who had been sent home. For obvious reasons, we did not do a great deal of informational work regarding the use of prisoners of war. Nor did we do a very great deal with regard to the presence of the West Indians. This was mainly a job of transportation, distribution, housing and allocation. But we felt that we had to make clear to the public several things--the reasons why these men were being brought in, the fact that they would not be used to replace local labor or drive wages down, the fact that they were free labor and not POW's or something like that. This was the first time that such a large number of foreign workers had been brought into Louisiana and we felt that a little informational work along those lines was necessary.

You will notice that we have emphasized cooperation with radio stations and daily and weekly newspapers and personal contacts with groups and individuals in our information work. Many of you have made far greater use of special publications, posters and bulletins. Those of you who are familiar with conditions in the South will understand me when I say that we had our doubts as to whether some of the methods so helpful elsewhere would work as well in Louisiana. Nor did we think it advisable in Louisiana to try to recruit white women for farm work or school boys and girls from the larger cities.

In summing up, I would like to say that in the opinion of us folks down in Louisiana, the ingredients of a successful farm labor information program are simple. They include an understanding of the situation, a thorough campaign based on the facts, and straightforward dealing with newspaper and radio people. There is no place in agricultural information work for the promoter or the man who does not know what the newspapers and radio stations want and need. From the smallest weekly to the biggest daily, from the 250-watt to the 50,000-watt clear channel station, they are quick to detect the exaggerated and the unsound. When the situation has been explained to the newspaper and radio people, when they know the need and the facts, they will just about do the job for you.

You will notice that we have placed a good bit of emphasis on most efficient use of available labor and farm machinery, on education and information. I think that quite likely that will be the main feature of the farm labor program in the future.

